

## **NEWS RELEASE**

### **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE BENTON LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX 922 Bootlegger Trail, Great Falls, MT, 59404**

05-29

For Immediate Release

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### **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE ISSUES ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT CONSERVATION AREA**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today issued the Environmental Assessment and accompanying Land Protection Plan for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area. The EA and Plan outline the actions necessary to establish the area and analyzes the environmental effects of those actions.

The project boundary for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area encompasses approximately 918,000 acres of land on the eastern side of the Continental Divide in northwestern Montana. To establish the Conservation Area, the Service would strategically acquire perpetual conservation easements from willing sellers on 170,000 acres of private land between the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and the South Fork of the Dearborn River.

The purpose of the project is to create and maintain a significant, intact block of important wildlife habitat between existing protected areas, including State Wildlife Management Areas, The Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Swamp Preserve and the Boone & Crockett Club's Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch. Protecting a large, continuous corridor of wildlife habitat along the Front will achieve the Service's, and its many partners' dual goal of conserving native wildlife while supporting traditional economic activities.

"The Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area will protect for future generations a living legacy of wildlife while underscoring the importance of private lands in large-scale conservation efforts," said Ralph Morgenweck, Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region. "The Service places great value on our public and private partnerships on the Front, without which we could not achieve the long-term protection of this truly remarkable landscape."

The Front is home to nearly every wildlife species described by Lewis and Clark in 1806, with the exception of free-ranging bison. Many of these species occur in relatively stable or increasing numbers. Private lands along the Front include important riparian corridors, wetland complexes and upland habitat for grizzly bears, trumpeter swans, raptors and other migratory birds.

In late 2004, the Service held a series of open houses in communities along the Front to provide information about, and solicit public input on the project. The Service also provided an extended opportunity following the open houses for the public to provide written comments on the project.

To request a copy of the EA/LPP, contact Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex: 922 Bootlegger Trail, Great Falls, MT, 59404; telephone (406) 727-7400. The EA can also be viewed online at <http://bentonlake.fws.gov>

Written comments or questions concerning the EA/LPP are welcome. Comments should be submitted to the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex at the mailing address indicated above by May 27, 2005.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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